DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 897 JC 010 480

AUTHOR	Trautmann, Nancy; Boes, Chris
TITLE	Sociology, Writing, and Reading and the Community College Learning Community: The Skills/Content Tango Principles of Sociology and Freshman English and Critical Reading and Principles of Sociology.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	12p.; Written with Uriel Trujillo and Early Page.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Community Colleges; Learning Strategies; Student Development; *Student Participation; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Learning Communities; *Northampton Community College PA

ABSTRACT

This document details the planning process and briefly discusses the experiences of faculty and students in two distinct paired-course learning communities at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem (Pennsylvania). One learning community paired a critical reading course with principles of sociology, while the other paired a freshmen composition course with principles of sociology. The first learning community took a fully integrated approach where faculty developed an almost seamless course for students; the other learning community was matched thematically, but was less integrated for both students and faculty. In both experiences, faculty appreciated the opportunity to interact across disciplines, and they noticed increases in faculty-student interaction compared to their traditional course offerings. Additionally, in both learning communities there was an increase in course retention and grades earned, compared with traditional course offerings. (LD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 454 897

Sociology, Writing, and Reading and the Community College Learning Community:

The Skills/Content Tango Principles of Sociology and Freshman English

and

Critical Reading and Principles of Sociology

By Nancy Trautmann and Chris Boes

with Uriel Trujillo and Earl Page

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Trautmann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ABSTRACT: Two different models of Learning Communities link content (Sociology) and skills courses (developmental reading and freshman composition) at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, PA. Approaches to planning, structuring and assessing the courses are explored, indicating a positive experience for both faculty and students with lower withdrawal and failure rates.

For too many faculty, teaching at a community college can mean days filled with classes sandwiched between meetings -- dealing with students with a wide range of abilities and with expectations quite different than our own. Pulled by competing demands for our time, we often work in isolation with little chance to interact with colleagues, and rarely outside our departments. In our isolation, we hope that we are all working toward the same outcomes yet awkwardly dance around questions about what the other half is doing: Do content courses reinforce the skills we teach? Do skills courses prepare students for content courses? It is often an uneasy dance. Enter Learning Communities and the opportunities they provide for collegial

TC010480

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and interdisciplinary interaction; they provide a chance to turn the awkward dance into a polished tango.

Interest in Learning Communities at Northampton Community College was sparked in January 1998 when faculty members Chris Boes and Uriel Trujillo, along with Director of Developmental Education, Jim Benner attended a Conference on Learning Communities. They returned to campus eager to experiment with NCC students. There was also interest in faculty working together to improve student learning and student writing among members of the English and Sociology faculty and soon Sociology Professor Earl Page and English Professor Nancy Trautniann were recruited to try the Learning Community idea. Aware that attendance, persistence, retention, and graduation rates are concerns, we proposed that linking classes for first-time/full time students would, perhaps, establish a connection to the community of the "academy" heretofore not experienced by first semester students. Understanding that many students who enroll at Northampton are the first in the family to attend college, we hoped that creating communities of learners would provide a support system missing in their homes. We also hoped that the pairings of content courses and skills courses would improve the application of skills to the content areas and provide a context for developing the reading and writing skills. So, two Learning Communities were planned for the Fall of 1998.

PLANNING, FORMAT AND DESIGN

There are many variations on the Learning Community ranging from loose pairings with faculty meeting for occasional conferences, to complete integration with overlapping instruction in each discipline. Both learning community pairings at NCC decided that they would require the same cohort of students in both classes and that the classes would be scheduled back to back

with both instructors for each of the LC courses present in both classes. This would give the groups large blocks of time, allowing flexibility. However, the two skills/content groupings chose quite different approaches to planning and structuring their learning communities based on their goals, their student populations, and their teaching styles.

When starting a new venture that involved a new concept in registering students for courses, it soon became clear that plans would need to involve careful attention to the advising and registration process. Course listings for each Learning Community class included information concerning the linked nature of each to the other. Academic advisors were informed of the goals of the Learning Community, and encouraged to suggest the Learning Community to students whom they thought might benefit from this experience, while clarifying the extra time commitment. Students then enrolled in each with at least some sense that their experience would be unique. Despite section notes on the schedule that informed students and advisors that students must register for both classes, several checks of class lists up until the start of the semester showed that students were frequently allowed to enroll in one section and not the other. With attention from faculty, administrators, and the staff from the records office, registration problems were detected, students were contacted and registrations were corrected.

Sociology and Reading

One Learning Community was created linking Critical Reading and Principles of Sociology to be taught by, Chris Boes and Uriel Trujillo. The most courageous aspect of the Learning Community experiment was the college's willingness to link a developmental skills course (Critical Reading) with a transfer content course (Principles of Sociology). Thus, a group of students for whom Critical Reading was a requirement (based upon the College's Placement Test scores) were permitted to enroll in Principles of Sociology who would not otherwise be

entitled to do so. Knowing that these students would be "at-risk," and wishing to create the most integrated Learning Community possible, the instructors in the Soc./Reading pair chose a fully integrated design involving both attendance and instruction by both instructors for the full three-hour class. Classes met three times per week, totaling nine hours per week for each instructor. During that time slot, neither instructor was free to schedule any other class.

Planning for the fully integrated Reading/Sociology Learning Community involved considerable investment of time for the faculty involved. Faculty first needed to read each other's text. Then they began the process of planning the semester - understanding that suggestions, assignments, additional materials, and the use of other media would require a substantial time commitment, and agreed to meet for at least eight hours per week, until mid-August. In fact, the frequency and length of sessions grew as they began to create specific assignments; preview films for possible inclusion; and discuss with each other visions for the students. While the planning time was considerable and may seem daunting to some considering Learning Communities, they found that the early stages focused on exploring pedagogic philosophy, methods, how they interacted with students, and how they had arrived at assessment criteria for measuring their "success." They found that later sessions concerning assessment of Learning Community students went more smoothly, because they had begun by clarifying what it is they expected from students in their individual classes. One of the most significant benefits of this stage of planning was that each was able to consider how the other's materials and approach could contribute to the students' understanding of the materials.

The planning led to a clear sense of how the Learning Community should be structured. The class of twenty students was divided into four villages of five students each and were seated at tables arranged in appropriate groupings. They would be working in their villages for the

entire semester, and that placement in a particular village was arbitrary but for an attempt at gender balance. They would be responsible to themselves, their village mates, others in the community, and to the faculty. They would be expected to read a great deal, write weekly, contribute to village discussions, present individually and in groups, participate in debate and all assignments -- written and oral -- would be evaluated by both instructors.

Materials for the Learning Community were chosen with an eye toward serious work with text analysis, as well as considerable emphasis on text comprehension -- using OUR TIMES, an anthology of essays which present different views of controversial social issues, and concept analysis -- using INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY, a Sociology text. In addition, students purchased CRITICAL THINKING, a text designed to make them more aware of the process of critical thinking as a necessary precursor to critical reading. Each of these texts had been used in traditional settings; however, lessons were created to dovetail readings in each, and the inclusion of film as text was an especially exciting addition to the curriculum. Each unit included readings from the Sociology text, readings, lecture material, a film for illustration, village work on collaborative note-taking, and either an individual paper, a group presentation, or both.

Assessment was also changed considerably by the complete integration in the Reading/Soc. Learning Community. It was necessary to design assignments and assessment tools which would fairly assess both the group work, while also clearly appreciating individual contributions to that work and would assess both reading skills and understanding of sociology content. Consequently, it was necessary to modify assignments from traditional sections of the courses to reflect the dual content and skills focus: Reading assessment tools needed more reworking because the Sociology content made the Learning Community very different from my other classes. Interpretation of text became "How does this apply to what we know of dominant

cultures, or social class, or institutions and how they impact people's lives?" Faculty had to be very clear about what students were expected to do by the end of the semester, and how to determine that they were doing it.

One clear benefit of this LC grouping could be seen in the difference between how students in the Learning Community interacted with each other, and the interaction among students in our other classes. Just as significant was the difference between how they "saw" us and how our other classes "saw" us. As Learning Community students prepared an assignment, or grappled with difficult text, or prepared presentations, there was a friendly competition. Students in the Learning Community seemed to ask each other for clarification before they would ask the Professors. More students took leadership roles in shaping the direction village work would take. Over time, some students made arrangements to meet outside class - not all, but certainly more than in other classes. This increased sense of student interdependence and responsibility was a major breakthrough in the Learning Community.

Sociology and English

The other Learning Community in the Fall 1998 also linked content and skills courses, Principles of Sociology taught by Earl Page and English I -- freshman composition taught by Nancy Trautmann. After considering options, they too chose not only to include a common cohort of students, but to block the classes so teachers and students could be together for two consecutive fifty minute periods. This allowed flexibility: they could run as separate classes, switch time slots, flex the times, allowing time for group projects, films, etc. Faculty both wanted to be present in each other's classes throughout the semester; however, because these were more traditional first semester college courses, faculty decided on a looser integration of the

two courses. Based on other experience with team teaching and a realistic sense of the demands of teaching four other courses besides the Learning Community, they chose a moderate approach to planning. They decided since they knew little of each other as people or instructors, they would do some initial planning to determine common themes and text materials for the courses.

During our initial planning meetings, they reviewed each others' current texts and syllabi and soon found that they were both dealing with issues related to diversity - gender, race, sexual orientation - in the courses and that they both were concerned with developing students' awareness of the importance of language in expressing our understanding of these ideas and in forming our experiences of race and gender and diversity. They decided that they would link the courses based on common themes. They reassessed current text books and reviewed alternative texts finally deciding on retaining the core text for Sociology and agreeing on a new text with readings (American Voices) for the English class that included materials related to the themes of both courses. With materials and common themes decided, they set out to plan the fall courses independently based on the framework of ideas they had started. For the first semester they essentially planned to run the classes as two separate but inter-related courses. This allowed for independent planning which better suited time constraints yet enabled them to keep the common plan in mind. Over the course of the semester they would then see where the plans coincided and where they could be more closely linked as the course went on. They believed that the links would emerge organically and hoped to stimulate students to find and explore the connections themselves.

From the outset, it was made clear to students that the Soc./English LC would have many common elements, and would share subject matter, but would be separate courses each with its own requirements and assessment. The English course required five major papers; some, though

not all of the suggested topics, could be connected to Sociology. Students were encouraged but not required to make the connections. There were also numerous smaller writing assignments - journals, summaries, etc. These provided additional opportunities for connections since students were encouraged to reflect and comment on material from both courses and one of the summaries was a summary of a sociology lecture. Assessment for the Sociology course (take-home essay exams) was also writing based and that provided an essential link between the courses.

It was clear from the outset that both the instructors and their approaches in the English/Sociology pairing were quite different but complementary. Trautmann in teaching composition relied heavily on student participation and involvement and Page relied on dramatic lectures filled with vivid, relevant illustrations to keep students interested and involved. As different as that seems, these two were complementary. Page's lectures provided benefits for writing instruction. Trautmann listened and took notes on content like a student, but also made notes of the connections to be made later on - ideas for paper topics, references back to ideas or people mentioned in the sociology material and examples Page used in explaining concepts, one of the most useful connections. Students resist the idea of getting specific in their writing, but pointed connections to the detailed illustrations of the Sociology lectures helped students see that they would not have understood the general point about animals using tools if it weren't for the detailed story about the Chimp using a stick to get termites out of a hole or the story about seagulls dropping shells on an old runway to open them. The first English papers of the semester had more detail and better development than usual.

Other benefits may have occurred from linking the content and skills courses. One related to the group work. Since much of the sociology course is lecture, pairing with a writing skills course where group work - pairs and small groups -- is common allowed students to

interact with each other more frequently. This doubtless helped them get to know one another and made them more comfortable interacting as some students commented on the end of semester assessment. Another benefit was the students' seeing the writing skills and processes as connected to the content course. Page's course required substantial writing on the take-home exams providing opportunity for us to stress the transfer. Page occasionally reminded students of similar expectations in the writing. Students began to see connections. Interestingly, there was even some carry over in the student's willingness to work with the writing process and seek out response to help them rewrite in the content course. When Prof. Page gives take home exams, he offers to review drafts and offer suggestions for improvement if the students come to him with work in progress before the exam is due; however, students hardly ever take advantage of his offer. But when he made the offer in the Learning Community, whether because draft review was a usual part of the process in the English class or because of the closer connections between faculty and students in the Learning Community, many students brought in drafts often handing him drafts of their writing before class and during break. They were working with the process of review and revision in writing for a content course.

COMMON BENEFITS

There were benefits we noted as part of the both Learning Communities - increased interaction with the students and an accompanying increased knowledge of the students was one such benefit. Being present in both classes and between classes, we had a longer than usual time to observe students (and to be observed by them). We all felt that made a tremendous difference in the student-teacher interaction. Even what usually seems insignificant - the time between classes - because a valuable and much-used resource. The breaks between the two back-to-back linked classes proved a surprising and important time for interaction. In that time, no one had to

run to another class and students had leisure to stop and talk and ask questions. Some days when the English class was doing work on drafts for papers, there would be the opportunity to answer questions and look over thesis statements or parts of drafts for 5 or 6 extra students who might not have gotten that individual attention otherwise. Sometimes break times for both Learning Communities saw informal groups congregating either in the class or hall or outside to continue a discussion of some topic from class or just chat. That kind of informal interaction helps students feel faculty are more approachable.

This increase in contact with students provides better opportunities to get to know each other. It enabled one quiet young woman who spoke little in or out of class, to talk about her frustrations with an overloaded schedule and confess her plans to withdraw. After a chat and some impromptu advising, she made her choice and the quiet and retiring student repeatedly sought help and advice and feedback from both faculty in the Learning Community and ultimately finished the semester with B or B- in both courses. Two others who were ready to drop one or both courses opted to take incompletes and try to finish after we contacted them and talked them out of giving up. In another semester, another course, we might never have known of their difficulties and they could well have fallen by the wayside.

Closer faculty interaction was a boon in both the Learning Communities, enabling us to fight the faculty isolation and forge connections with other faculty in other disciplines. The longer break time in the Reading/Sociology LC, provided a valuable time for faculty interaction. Break time often found Uriel and Chris sitting at a picnic table outside "reflecting" on what had just occurred, sharing impressions of how things seemed to go; fine tuning; using each other as sounding boards. This was the first of what would come to be arguably the most valuable "gift" of teaching in a Learning Community.

One of the first indicators we had that this experience was different was attendance and retention. Attendance was relatively good throughout the semester, better than we usually noticed in other courses. In the English/Soc. Learning Community no students withdrew from the course and ended the semester with the same 23 students we started with and no one failed. That is remarkable. Attendance and retention were also better in the Reading/ Soc. Learning Community. Of the original twenty students, only three did not successfully complete the two courses. In one case the student was involved in disciplinary actions, one lost two members of her family by violence within the first six weeks of the semester, and one was so deficient in skills that no amount of help would be enough without his commitment of many hours outside class to which he was unable to commit. We believe that in all three of these cases, students would not have been retained in any academic environment.

CONCLUSIONS

In both of these very different ways to bridge the skill/content divide, we saw benefits to both faculty and students. Only time will tell whether there is long-term impact, but for at least one semester, these students had a positive learning experience, and we believe it has had positive impact. Both teams have had positive feedback from students and informal self-reporting gives evidence of students doing well in the second semester, but there is not yet any hard data. Despite evidence of tangible benefits in the low withdrawal and failure rates in both Learning Communities, we believe that the biggest benefits are intangible, closer relationships among faculty, among students and between faculty and students.

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 630
Washington, DC 20036

FAX: 202-452-1844

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1100 West Street, 2nd Floor
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com

EFF-088 (Rev. 9/97)
PREVIOUS VERSIONS OF THIS FORM ARE OBSOLETE.

Sent by:RRTS SCIENCE May-23-98 10:59pm From 6188614167282452184 4 Page 3/ 3